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*Taming Egoism: Adam Smith on Empathy, Imagination and Justice**

Abstract

I argue that the construction of the social order, as shown by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, depends on people's ability to tame their inborn egoism. According to the philosopher's anthropological assumptions a human being learns through life experiences how to control his self-interest so that it does not threaten societal existence. During socialization, a human being – still an egoist to some extent – continues role-playing by the use of the psychological mechanisms of empathy and imagination. As a result he develops sympathy, at first, as a reaction to real people's emotions experienced in a particular context. Finally, he naturally and more and more unconsciously takes under consideration the perspective of an impartial spectator. The gradually developing process brings about consequences that improve social morality, such as control over the expression of intense emotions, which is a condition for experiencing emotional harmony, or a refrain from pursuing one's self-interest at the expense of someone else, so as not to become a subject of social contempt. One should also bear in mind that none of these consequences was carefully planned in advance nor purposefully executed.

Key words: Adam Smith, egoism, empathy, moral imagination, justice.

Słowa klucze: Adam Smith, egoizm, empatia, wyobraźnia moralna, sprawiedliwość.

Introduction

Like many of his predecessors and successors Adam Smith asked himself the question what makes society durable. Following the Aristotelian tradition he saw society as a mo-

* Polish text: *Poskramianie egoizmu: Adam Smith o empatii, wyobraźni i sprawiedliwości*, "Cracow Studies of Constitutional and Legal History" 9 (2016), issue 2, p. 233–241.

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ral entity founded on a feedback relationship: the morality of any society depends on the moral character of its individual members, while their moral development depends on their membership of a society. In this article I will try to demonstrate that Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*[1] is principally concerned with exploring the mechanisms of taming egoism, a propensity which is part of our human nature. This thesis is likely to be received with skepticism by many of Smith's critics, especially those that believe there is a gap between the young Adam Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, an idealist critic of egoism, and the mature author of the *Wealth of Nations*,[2] who takes a realistic view of the role of self-interest in human affairs. I'd rather go with their opponents who, instead of pursuing the elusive turning point in Smith's intellectual biography, stand up for the unbroken continuity of his thought. I will pick up some elements of the latter interpretation, though they are not central to the argument of this article. Nor is it intended to join the debate on 'das Adam Smith Problem', i.e. the question of compatibility of his two major works.[3] This caveat is meant to make clear what my position is with regard to that highly divisive issue and to indicate that my analysis concerns solely *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Adam Smith's answer to the classic philosophical question about the basic trait, or inclination, of human nature is astutely realistic:

> Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care … Though it may be true, therefore, that every individual, in his own breast, naturally prefers himself to all mankind, he dares not to look mankind in the face and avow that he acts according to this principle.[4]

This quotation should be enough to expose the fallacy of young Adam Smith's idealism. He is a realist. Yet, what is also worth noting, his is a realism with an astute sense of man's social existence. Man is self-centred 'by nature', and likewise 'naturally' he prefers not to admit that he is so to others. Thus, for Adam Smith egoism has both an ethical and an epistemological dimension. That has wide-ranging implications for his view of society, his notion of justice, and, perhaps most importantly, for his concept of human nature. At its core is not only the in-born inclination to prefer oneself to the rest of humanity, but also the capability to sympathize; and sympathy, together with imagination, provides the foundation for individual and social morality. This article will try to open

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[1] A. Smith, *Teoria uczuć moralnych*, transl. D. Petsch, Warszawa 1989 [Polish translation of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published 1759]. In this version of the article the quotations from the *TML* are taken from the standard text (the final Sixth Edition of 1790) edited by Knud Haakonson in the series Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Cambridge University Press 2002. In the footnotes the first page number refers to the Polish translation, the second, in square brackets, to the Cambridge Texts edition.

[2] A. Smith, *Badania nad naturą i przyczynami bogactwa narodów*, transl. O. Einfeld, Z. Sadowski, and G. Wolff, Vol. 1–2, Warszawa 1954 [Polish translation of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, first published 1776].

[3] For more detailed surveys of the controversy cf. D. Göçmen, *The Adam Smith Problem. Reconciling Human Nature and Society in "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" and "The Wealth of Nations"*, London 2007, p. 1–19; and D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smiths Moral Philosophy*, Oxford 2007, p. 115–126; and L. Montes, *Das Adam Smith Problem: Its Origins, the Stages of the Current Debate, and One Implication for Our Understanding of Sympathy*, "Journal of the History of Economic Thought", 2003, Vol. 25, p. 63–90.

[4] A. Smith, *Theory*, p. 121–122. [p. 96].

up a new perspective on Adam Smith's reflections in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* from the vantage point offered by the formula 'man is an egoist, but…' The ellipsis opens a blank to be filled by multiple strategies of socialization, offsetting man's innate egoism. The following chapters will trace the sequence of the empathic reaching out beyond oneself, or in other words, the process of taming one's egoism.

Where does moral imagination come from?

The metaphor actor-spectator, a key term in some of the studies of Adam Smith's moral psychology, expresses very well a dichotomy at the heart of his concept of social life.[5] In fact, every individual is both an actor and a spectator; thus observing and being observed determines the experience of social life. However, this formula should not mean that society is an aggregate of people who continually scrutinize one another and use their faculty of rational judgment to establish everybody's moral character. The acts of observation and being observed is associated by Adam Smith with momentary 'changing places in fancy', i.e. not just watching the other person, but, more importantly, stepping into his shoes and letting oneself be affected by what he feels in his situation. Feeling, conceived as a moral faculty superior to reason, is absolutely crucial to the action of reaching out to the other. The prioritizing of feeling shows that already at this stage Adam Smith was a realist, sceptical of knowledge that could be obtained solely from the senses or the emotions. Their deficiencies are made up by imagination, which affords a momentary, direct insight into the feelings of another person:[6]

> By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same tortments, we enter as it were his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something…[7]

This move – the emotional reaction of the spectator to the feelings and motivation of the actor – paves the way for the formation of moral judgment. The process begins with the spectator's sympathy, usually aided by imagination,[8] reaching out to the circumstances of the actor's position/action and trying to make sense of them in all their complexity. Once the context of the actor's position has been established, his feelings can be judged. If the observer were to be moved directly, as if by jump spark, by the feelings of the other person, it would open Adam Smith to the charge of simple emotivism, i.e. the theory that moral judgments are indistinguishable from expressions of emotion. That, however, is not the case. What makes Smith's account of sympathy special is the role he

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[5] Cf. Ch.L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge 1999, p. 40–58.

[6] This 'projective' capability of sharing the feeling of others will be called here sympathy and empathy interchangeably. Similarly, I will make no noteworthy distinction between the words "spectator" and "observer".

[7] A. Smith, *Theory*, p. 6 [p. 12].

[8] He admits that on some occasions empathy can be triggered directly and instantenously, without the participation of the imagination, as in a spontaneous reaction to strong emotions, like pain or joy, vividly expressed in the face and gestures of another person.

grants to the exploration of circumstances, or situational context before the moral judgement sets in. That preliminary scrutiny makes the whole process more objective, the more so that it may involve more than one point of view. Consequently, Adam Smith's theory is not straightforwardly emotivist; and even a label like 'refined emotivism' is not quite apt either. For although the moral quality of the actor is ultimately measured on the emotional scale of observer, the latter is not an unreflective, mechanical resonator, mirroring the actor's feelings. If, however, we are to accept the phrase 'refined emotivism' we need to understand what is the nature of that refinement. I would say it consists in locking sympathy into a cognitive and social frame without which it would not have been possible to carry out the analytical-interpretative study of the object-in-its-context. Moreover, Smith's concept of enhanced sympathy fits in well with his belief that mutual understanding is the glue of communal life. According to his theory of moral propriety, an individual confronts the circumstances with his own imagined emotional reaction and the emotions and motives of another person acting in the same circumstances. After comparing both reactions, i.e. finding that they are analogous or different, the observer concludes that the actor's reaction is right and proper or wrong and improper respectively.[9] In other words, whenever the spectator sets his imagination in motion, puts himself in the shoes of the actor, and finds that his feelings match those of the actor, the analogy is tantamount to approval and moral rightness of the actor's conduct. Smith's use of words expressing moral judgment (right/wrong) and emotional reaction (approval/disapproval) as if they were perfect synonyms indicates that his moral theory is basically a moral psychology.

An analysis of Adam Smith's handling of approval and disapproval reveals that he regards them not only as means of expression of feelings and of moral evaluaton but also as a stimulant. The latter, as I will try to show, has enormous consequences for society. The discovery of an affinity between the feelings of the actor and the spectator is a source of pleasure for both. The resulting approval creates a positive feedback, i.e. the increase of the original sense of pleasure; in case of a symmetrical negative reaction the imagined grief and pain help to alleviate the intensity of the real feeling. In either case Smith ascribes to the observer a disinterested pleasure born out of the harmony of feelings. He explains this effect by the pervasive, natural attractiveness of beauty and harmony – an explanation that reveals Smith's partiality for an aesthetic view of human nature.[10] As both the actors and the spectators find their analogous reactions pleasant, the shared experience stimulates them to act in such a way as to have more of it. To ensure its recurrence either side has to develop an interest in the personality and the emotional life of their partners. Thus the pleasure of approval, or more precisely, sharing the same feelings, acts as a stimulant to work on better mutual understanding.

The flow of sympathy is by no means a one-directional process, which has its source in the imaginative reaction of the observer intrigued and drawn by some else's experi-

[9] "When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and on the contrary, when, upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them." Cf. A. Smith, *Theory*, p. 17 [p. 20].

[10] Cf. Ch.L. Griswold, *Adam Smith*, p. 120.

ence. In fact, the success of this process of 'contagion' depends also on the actor. If the actor is overwhelmed by passion and goes over the top, the spectator of whatever kind, *l'homme moyen sensuel* or one with a highly developed imaginative faculty, will not be able to respond adequately. For the communication to be effective, resulting in the actor to getting some gratification from the approval of others, he should look at his situation from the outside, with the eye of the observer. The imaginative holding himself out at arm's length would normally result in the actor bridling the raging fury of the original outburst so as to make it understandable to the spectators.

> Upon these two different efforts, upon that of the spectator to enter into the sentiments of the person principally concerned, and upon that of the person principally concerned, to bring down his emotions to what the spectator can go along with, are founded two different sets of virtues. The soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity, are founded upon the one: the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, of self-government, of that command of passions which subjects all the movements of our nature to what our own dignity and honour, and the propriety of our conduct require, take their origin from the other.[11]

At this point I would like to go back again to the problem of continuity and change in Adam Smith's work. Although the phrase 'invisible hand' is generally regarded as a hallmark of the economic system presented in *The Wealth of Nations*, it seems that its print can also be found in his moral philosophy. Like other philosophers of Enlightenment Smith believes in social amelioration, but not because some individuals decided, on the advice of reason, to start working to achieve the moral betterment of society. Moral change does take place, not as a result of deliberate, concerted effort, but as an *unintended* consequence of individuals seeking the gratification of sharing their feelings through the use of their imagination, the control of excessive passion, and especially the reining in of one's egoism. Thus without aware of it, they not only sustain the functioning of social life but also help to raise its moral quality.[12]

From an impartial observer to justice

So far this analysis of Adam Smith's account of the emergence of moral judgements has focused on the empathic relationship between the actor and the spectator, a pair of roles picked up by real characters. However, to save his theory the charge of subjectivity Smith complements these two perspectives with a third one, that of an impartial observer. It would be a mistake to treat the latter as another person, as real as the other two, joining the game. If so far the assessment of the propriety of a certain behavior was connected with the feelings of a real spectator who imagined himself in the situation of the other person, now the moral judgment depends on the concord of the feelings of the actors and those of an imagined, third-person observer. "The real observer introduces an

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[11] A. Smith, *Theory*, p. 29 [p. 29].

[12] Cf. K. Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*, Cambridge 1981, p. 55; and J.H. Keppler, *Adam Smith and the Economy of the Passions*, London–New York 2010, p. 5.

impartial observer", sums up Knud Haakonssen.[13] To be sure, this second phase of the evaluation of the behavior of others could be embarked upon without going through the first one in which the physical presence of other people, i.e. the fact of social existence, continually provokes one to imagine how they react to my behavior (what do they feel about it?) and use those reactions as cue to modify it so as to get more approval (given the premise that men have a natural desire for the 'harmony of hearts').

> Bring him into society and he is immediately provided with a mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and the behavior of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and the impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind.[14]

Since man's life, from the moment of birth, unfolds among omnipresent human mirrors, taking note of the judgments of others becomes an ingrained practice. The individual no longer needs to be under constant surveillance to behave morally. The process of his socialization is like having a graft of a mirror implanted into one's mind. The function of the new organ is to stimulate and augment our moral imagination.

> We endeavor to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it.[15]

We can get a better insight into Adam Smith's concept of the imagined impartial observer and his judgments by comparing it with John Rawls' imagined 'rational negotiators', a secluded tribunal deliberating and handing down judgements behind 'the veil of ignorance'. While their goal is similar – both Rawls and Smith set much store by the impartiality of justice – their instruments of impartial judgement are very different. Rawls' standard bearer is a paragon of perfection, omniscient, perfectly disinterested, with perfect powers of imagination, perfectly rational.[16] Adam Smith, on the contrary, has no interest in 'a perfect being'. In accordance with the tenets of his theory of morality, he models his impartial observer on the ordinary, fallible human being, with his feelings as the measure of moral judgment, his capacity for sympathy, and his imperfect knowledge. The single feature that distinguishes him from ordinary humanity is his detachment from the actor's situation and circumstances. Keeping a safe distance enables him to evaluate the things that happen in society from a critical perspective, without letting his emotions run away with him. While he is cool and dispassionate, he remains open to all sentiments and affections except those that would infringe his impartiality. Unlike the Rawlsian rational negotiator, blind to all the particular natural contingencies, the knowledge the impartial observer brings into his judgments is concrete and made up

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[13] K. Haakonssen, *The Science*, p. 58.

[14] A. Smith, *Theory*, p. 163–164 [p. 129].

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 163 [p. 129].

[16] In his concept of the perfectly rational impartial observer (in *Theory of Justice*) John Rawls appears to overemphasize rationality at the expense of impartiality; he is also mistaken in aligning Smith with the utilitarians. After an exchange of letters with D.D. Raphael (in 1973) Rawls declared he was ready to revise his position and would make the appropriate corrections in a new edition of his work. In the end, however, the new edition was published without them, cf. D.D. Raphael, *ibidem*, p. 46.

of particulars. Although he does not know more of the actor's actual situation than the actor himself, yet his detached position enables him to get an empathic understanding of the context and arrive at a fair judgment.

Now I would like to go back to my suggestion, which lies at the heart of this interpretation of Adam Smith's idea of human nature, that we balance the first part of the statement "Man is an egoist, but…" with the extention of the "but". This phrase can be used as a link between two key issues of Smith's moral philosophy, the impartial observer and justice in society.

Thanks to the gradual construction of the inner mirror in one's own imagination, the individual gets accustomed to the idea that "though every man may, according to the proverb, be the whole world to himself, to the rest of mankind he is a most insignificant part of it".[17] And once it has been adopted, it becomes the rock on which all his social relations are built. It is the emergence of a mental construct, the impartial observer, that produces in us a change as dramatic as the Copernican revolution. It confronts an individual who was used to thinking of himself as the centre of the world with a stunning reality: he is but one of the billions of people on this globe. The impartial observer also puts in place a psychological mechanism which prevents the disenchanted individuals from lapsing into their old egoistic ways. Should any of them begin to pursue his selfish interests doing harm to others, such wicked conduct will alert his impartial observer. It will induce in the egoist the negative feelings of his victims, a blowback of resentment that can be treated as a punishment already in action or a warning of the retribution to come.

The significance of this retaliatory mechanism does not end with workings of individual psychology. Adam Smith uses it to introduce his discussion of justice. Broadly speaking, just as the feelings of approval and disapproval determine the moral evaluation of conduct so does empathy decide over justice and injustice in society. But Smith does no leave it at that. He sharpens the profile of justice and puts more emphasis on its social function by contrasting it with benevolence. Moreover, he adds to the relationship between the actor and the impartial observer the relationship between the latter and the victim. To come into being both justice and benevolence need a double accord of feelings. So we can talk of an act of benevolence – deserving a reward – if the impartial observer shares both the feelings and the motivation of the benefactor and the gratitude of the beneficiary.[18] It is similar with justice, though here Smith analyzes the situation *a contrario*, i.e. when injustice takes place and justice does not materialize. On those occasions whenever the impartial observer disapproves of the feelings and intentions of the wrongdoer and identifies with the resentment of the sufferer, these sentiments give rise to the expectation of punishment which is due for the wrongdoing.

Faced with task of characterizing justice Smith compares it to grammar. This is not a fleeting analogy. The one and the other have rules that stand for order and have to be obeyed. If it can be said with a great degree of certainly that the beauty of grammar does not have too many devotees, it is no less certain that grammar the codebook is indispensable to all language users. If grammar and justice are the mandatory rules that enable us

[17] A. Smith, *Theory*, p. 122 [p. 97].

[18] "Our contempt for the folly of the agent hinders us from thoroughly entering into the gratitude of the person to whom the good office has been done. His benefactor seems uworthy of it." *Ibidem*, p. 103 [p. 84].

distinguish between correct and incorrect, benevolence represents the supererogatory. In analogy to language competence it is like going beyond mere communication to the use of language in ways that are aesthetically pleasing, to 'the sublime and elegant in composition', the extra treat, as Adam Smith explains:

> Though Nature, therefore, exhorts man to acts of benevolence, by the pleasing consciousness of the deserved reward, she has not thought it necessary to guard and enforce the practice of it by the terros of merited punishment in case it should be neglected. It is the ornament which embellishes, not the foundation that supports the building, and which it was, therefore, sufficient to recommend, but by no means necessary to impose. Justice, on the contrary, is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice.[19]

Just as no language can exist without grammar so no society can continue to exist if its laws, i.e. its system of justice, are not observed. The empathic reaction to injustice through participation of others in the resentment of each and every sufferer, regardless of the degree of kinship or closeness of social ties between him and the commiserating observers, is a sure sign that the rules of justice have been broken. It is as obviously clear as in the case of a violation of the rules of grammar. This mechanism of installing justice and keeping it on course is universal, firstly, because it is replicated in the individual experience in practically all forms of human society, and, secondly, because it functions to a large extent independently of human planning and control, on the principle of the 'invisible hand'. Justice is an indispensable constitutive element of society, and yet Adam Smith makes neither its operations nor the observance of its rules dependent on human reason. Reason has had no part in the process of civilizing mankind,[20] its role having been taken over by pleasure obtained from the accord of the feelings of the actor and the spectator. Yet, to be precise, the rise of civilized societies was not a direct, but a collateral, unintended consequence of the pursuit of pleasure. The universal approval of punishment founded on the sharing of the resentment of the victims of injustice as well as the fear of meriting punishment are two more factors which have driven mankind forward on the road to civilization in the same oblique, unintended manner.

Conclusion

In Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* the taming of egoism, as I was trying to demonstrate, is the key factor in the creation and maintenance of social order. Smith presents a model of interaction which keeps reproducing a social equilibrium and a system of rules on the basis of shared emotions rather than reason. Egoism (selfishness) is a dysfunctional factor in this process, yet it is possible to get in one's stride. The dethronement of egoism goes through two phases, one is the shock of a 'Copernican moment' and the other the slow aquisition of the right mental habits. Egoism cannot be eradicated as it is part of human nature so the best thing to do is to have it gradually marginalized with

[19] *Ibidem*, s. 127 [p. 101].
[20] Cf. *ibidem*, p. 112.

the help of the psychological mechanisms of imaginative empathy and role playing, i.e. watching himself and others from different perspectives. The imaginative reaching out begins with persons in the real world and culminates in the creation of the impartial observer, a detached mental monitor who helps one to manage one's relations with others. This process produces several beneficial consequences for the individual and social morality at large. They include control over violent emotions, the maximization of pleasure from the harmonization of feelings with other people, refraining from the pursuit of one's self-interest at the expense of others, avoiding other people's condemnation or ostracism. One should also bear in mind that none of those consequences was pre-planned or represent the completion of a deliberate effort. They come about as unintended consequences of other actions, the work of an "invisible hand".

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